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ABSTRACT

An analysis of structural and institutional violence against women in three cultures in Southeast Asia, Thailand, Cambodia, and among refugees of Burma, was generated by groups of women and men from these countries. Group members also discussed strategies for transforming systems supporting gender-based violence into structures of peace and gender-justice. The author describes the model, based on principles from liberation theory and feminist psychology, used to facilitate these discussion groups. The analysis of factors and societal systems that support structural and institutional gender-based violence is also presented along with group members recommended strategies for social change. (Contains 14 references.) (Author)

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Feminist Interventions for Southeast Asian Women Trauma Survivors:

Deconstructing gender-based violence and developing structures of peace

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Abstract

An analysis of structural and institutional violence against women in three cultures in Southeast Asia, Thailand, Cambodia, and among refugees of Burma, was generated by groups of women and men from these countries. Group members also discussed strategies for transforming systems supporting gender-based violence into structures of peace and gender-justice. The author describes the model, based on principles from liberation theory and feminist psychology, used to facilitate these discussion groups. The analysis of factors and societal systems that support structural and institutional gender-based violence is also presented along with group members' recommended strategies for social change.

Feminist Interventions for Southeast Asian Women Trauma Survivors: Deconstructing gender-based violence and developing structures of peace

Gender-based violence is a primary health and psychological threat for women around the world (United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, 1998). Scholars and activists have discussed violence against women as a form of oppression that occurs at structural, institutional, and individual levels (Agger, 1997; Moane, 1994; Pincus, 2000; Young, 2000). Through the systematic privileging of men and the masculine and subordinating women and the feminine, these interlocking systems of oppression support and reinforce the subjugation of women and the various forms of violence perpetrated against them. Additionally, other social identities and social locations, such as race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religious affiliation and age, may interact with gender to increase or decrease the power of a perpetrator, the impact of the violence, and the vulnerability of the targeted person (Frye, 2001).

Feminist scholars, grassroots and NGO workers in most countries in Southeast Asia have described the patriarchal structures upon which these societies are built, whereby women occupy a subordinate status and are therefore at risk for various forms of abuse, assault and exploitation (Kabilsingh, 1991; Pongsapich, 1997). Since 1997, my Thai colleague, Ouyporn Khuankaew, and I, have been working with groups in Thailand, Cambodia, and within the refugee communities of Burma, to deconstruct the elements of gender-based violence against women at the structural, institutional, and individual levels. We have also been developing strategies for social change aimed at creating structures of peace and gender justice. An important goal of the project has been to increase its relevance by crossing boundaries and collaborating with people in as many

social locations as possible. Thus, in cooperation with local partners, we facilitated discussion groups in rural and urban areas, with women trauma survivors, frontline grassroots advocates, members of NGO's, government workers in hospitals and clinics, and academics. Subsequently, we worked with some these advocates and helpers to develop expanded services for their clients and community members based on the knowledge generated in the discussion groups.

In the remainder of this article I will summarize the methodology and collaboration processes utilized in this project. Also included will be a discussion of several themes emerging from our collective work with the groups from these three countries in deconstructing structural and institutional violence against women and identifying directions for social change.

Methodology

The methodology for conducting the discussion groups was informed by overlapping principles from liberation theory (Friere, 1972; Ivey, 1995) and feminist psychology (Brown, 1994; Landrine, Klonoff, & Brown-Collins, 1995.) Thus, a core value was to undermine and disrupt the enactment of the processes of psychological colonization and neo-colonialism that can be embedded in the interactions between people from the west and the Global South (Lugones & Spelman, 1983). Ouyporn, my Thai colleague, and I, explicitly defined our positions in the groups as co-learners and co-constructors of the knowledge to be generated and viewed our primary function as one of designing questions and experiences that encouraged the wisdom of the group members to emerge through the group process. We attempted to address the tension of centralizing the values of anti-domination and diversity by challenging our collaborators

to deconstruct any of their ideas that appeared to be rooted in oppression and domination and by encouraging and supporting them in challenging our ideas, techniques, and processes of facilitating the groups. Of critical importance for me, as a white westerner, was to engage in a power-sharing partnership with my Thai partner and with group members. To accomplish this goal, Ouyporn and I engaged in continuous reflection in order to mediate the power dynamics within our relationship and to address those dynamics that might undermine mutuality and collaboration. We were committed to processing our experiences honestly within our partnership, even when the feedback involved difficult dialogues. Additionally, we regularly engaged in similar reflexive processes with the groups with whom we worked in order to encourage power sharing. We found that the use of this methodology acknowledged all of our contributions, strengths and resources and minimized power-over dynamics.

Factors supporting violence against women

During discussion groups aimed at facilitating participants' deconstructing structural and institutional gender-based violence within their cultures and communities, our collaborators consistently identified a number of factors that support violence against women. Together, these factors formed a complex web of interconnected systems that support and reinforce violence against women in their societies.

The impact of religion was a primary area of discussion for all of the groups. Thailand, Cambodia and Burma are predominantly Theravada Buddhist; thus, participants regarded the institution of Buddhism as a strong determining force in the social fabric and the other institutions within each society. Within Theravada Buddhism, women are prohibited from ordination as monks (bikkunis), though, in a new

development last year, Chatsumarn Kabilisingh, engaged Buddhist activist and recently retired religion professor from Bangkok's well-respected Thammasat University, traveled to Sri Lanka to receive ordination in the Siam lineage. This caused quite a stir in Thailand and other surrounding countries and may prove to be the turning point, at least for Thai women, in raising their status through the possibility of full ordination. In these countries, where spiritual tradition, culture, and politics are so interconnected, this kind of gender-based discrimination is foundational in the justification of women's subordination of all kinds, and especially gender-based violence (Khuankaew, 1999).

Our collaborators also described the ways that various aspects of society interact to systematically make education more available to men than women. For example, within each culture it is the responsibility of children to pay respect to parents and to prepare to take care of them when they grow older. Often a family will only be able to afford to send some of the children to school, and, due to social belief systems supported by the religious institutions, the boys in the family are most likely to be chosen to go to school beyond the primary grades while the girls stay home and take care of household and child rearing tasks. Additionally, within Buddhist societies, all boys are expected to ordain for a period of time at some point before they reach adulthood, and the temples provide education for them during their period as an initiate and after ordination, if they choose to remain monks. Girls do not have access to these educational and religious opportunities but still are expected to support and care for the aging parents and sometimes the entire family. Due to the effects of globalization and rapid industrialization, the traditional routes for women to earn money within the villages or to contribute to the welfare of the family by working the rice fields, are shrinking.

Especially if poverty is an issue, girls and women often find themselves lured or sold into prostitution or other exploitive income generation activities, such as sweatshops, in order to fulfill their familial obligations and to "make merit" for themselves and their families by providing for aging parents.

Group discussions revealed sexism within educational systems. For example, in high schools, colleges, and universities, women are systematically discouraged or excluded from particular majors or from studying subjects defined culturally as "male", such as politics or engineering. Further, educational materials are gendered in their depictions of people in occupations and professions. Men are portrayed in the public sphere as leaders, scientists, mathematicians, or other high profile political or professional positions; whereas, women are depicted in such roles as homemakers, child care providers, and domestic workers. These images are reinforced in the media (television, newspaper and magazine ad campaigns, etc.) and through modeling since, in all of these countries, most public officials, business and corporate executives, academics, and other individuals holding positions of power and influence, are men.

Societal belief systems and values that underlie and permeate the structures and institutions of society in reinforcing male supremacy and patriarchy justify and perpetuate the oppression of women and gender-based violence against women. Examples of common attitudes identified by our collaborators as pervading each society include:

1. Women are weak and cannot take care of themselves; therefore they need to stay home where it is safe. They need men to take care of them.

2. Men are superior, particularly because of their intellectual capacities and physical strength; therefore, they should be on top. Women are not really capable.
3. Women are dirty because of menstruation.
4. Being born as a woman is due to bad kamma (karma) from a past life.
5. It is the responsibility of the woman to keep the family together. When a relationship fails, it is the fault of the woman.
6. In relation to incidents of gender-based violence, such as partner abuse or sexual assault, the following beliefs regarding women pervade each culture:
    - The woman asked for it or caused it to happen;
    - Partner abuse: She was a bad wife or partner. The woman should stay in the relationship; it is her duty to her partner and her children.
    - It is her kamma if she was assaulted or abused.
7. A variety of sayings or storylines reinforcing the subordination of women are prevalent. Examples include
    - A woman is like a flower along the way. You pick it and then throw it away.
    - When you have a daughter, it is like having a toilet.
    - Men are like the rice grain; you throw it and it will grow. Women are like the husk; it won't grow so you toss it away.
    - Women are the back legs of the elephant.
    - The man is gold; the woman is white cloth. When something goes wrong, the woman's reputation is destroyed and cannot be repaired.

These values are reflected within the legal and law enforcement systems of the three countries as well. Our group members reported that it is often not possible for women to divorce their husbands on grounds of domestic violence or infidelity; whereas, men can divorce women without just cause. Few laws are on the books protecting women from partner abuse, and even when laws exist, the male dominated police and judicial systems do not enforce them and often participate in further abuse and exploitation. Women are not taken seriously, are blamed for the behavior of the abusive partner or assailant, and are usually ostracized within their communities.

Collaborators in exile from Burma emphasized the influences of having fled a country in which the government is a military dictatorship that regularly perpetrates acts of violence on its own citizens, especially ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and women. Minority women are especially vulnerable because of the use of rape by the military for ethnic cleansing, as a torture strategy, and to terrorize, threaten, and punish ethnic men who are involved in resistance activities. The previously described societal attitudes serve to further support the objectification and subordination of refugee women in Thailand, where they are typically unwelcome and objectified. After leaving their country and becoming legal or illegal refugees in Thailand, men of Burma reportedly pass along the abuse they have received to those who are more vulnerable, particularly women. Thai police and military authorities target refugee women for sexual harassment and assault since the refugees do not have any real legal recourse, especially if they in the country illegally. Sweatshop owners exploit women's labor for the same reasons.

Similarly, Cambodians have endured a long and violent history of cruelty and abuse under the Pol Pot regime, and most of our Khmer group members were in refugee

camps in Thailand for 8 to 10 years until as recently as 1995. Collaborators indicated that Cambodia continues to be economically unstable and subject to military crackdowns involving the killing of innocent civilians and activists advocating for a less corrupt, more stable government. There are many reported incidents of assassinations in order to steal money, material items, or to remove someone from a position that is wanted by someone else. This stressful environment reinforces violence of all kinds, and is particularly deadly for women and children. Within Khmer society, described as extremely hierarchical in gender relations, women are expected to submit to their partners in all matters. Men are under significant stress and often are experiencing traumatic stress responses originating from the Pol Pot period and perpetuated by continuing social, economic, and political instability. They may use violence within their relationships with women partners to express power and control within their personal lives in response to living in a context that is extremely unpredictable and often dangerous for them.

Finally, both Cambodia and Burma have long histories of colonization, Cambodia by the French and Burma by the British. Our collaborators identified the dehumanizing and culturally disruptive effects of male supremist and patriarchal colonizers as important variables in understanding contemporary structural violence and the increased vulnerability of women as targets of abuse or assault.

Directions for social change

Group participants generated numerous strategies for transforming institutions and systems that reinforce and support gender-based oppression into structures of peace and gender justice. These strategies have been categorized into actions focused at the individual, family, community, institutional, and societal levels.

Individual level

The central theme of the individual strategies generated by collaborators was self-responsibility. Group members emphasized the importance of each person becoming aware of his or her own values about gender and working to change any values, beliefs, and resulting behaviors that support gender-based oppression. Further, members indicated that each individual must make a commitment to increase knowledge about women's rights and to avoid passing on the oppressive values and beliefs that contribute to violence against women. Insisting on power sharing as a foundation for relationships between men and women was another important step in dismantling gender-based oppression, according to the groups.

Family level

Group members discussed developing power-sharing relationships between spouses and partners, particularly in parenting children. Two strategies for interrupting the transmission of oppression from one generation to the next were identified. These included raising children within a family system that demonstrates flexible gender roles and distributing traditionally "gendered" tasks and responsibilities outside of the typical gender "boxes." Many participants emphasized that eliminating the use of violence and coercion, especially by men in the family, was critical to social change.

Community level

Support and advocacy were two major themes for change at the community level. Support groups, feminist-based counseling, and informal networking for women were highlighted as important tools of empowerment. These mechanisms help women gain strength from one another, recognize that they are not alone, and promote information

exchange. Additionally, based on the notion that "knowledge is power", development of community education programs focusing on women's rights, income generation methods, and social change, contribute to raising women's status in society. All of the groups agreed that men must be included and cultivated as allies. Thus, collaborators emphasized the importance of education campaigns about gender and violence against women that focused on the responsibilities of men, their roles in promoting more egalitarian societies, and how more equal partnerships with women would benefit them as well. Mixed gender educational and consciousness-raising groups focusing on gender justice were also considered critical in teaching women and men how to work together using power-sharing approaches.

Organizational level

At the organizational level, groups gave attention to the importance of the structure of an organization. They pointed out that organizations based on autocratic and authoritarian models where men hold the more powerful positions and women fill the lower level jobs tend to mimic the larger social and political systems and reinforce a patriarchal and male supremist society. Thus, deliberate efforts to increase representation of women at the higher levels of an organization were thought to be essential in rearranging oppressive gender relations. Additionally, changing the autocracies to more power sharing organizational structures was highly recommended.

Institutional and societal levels

At the institutional and societal levels, groups chose to focus on the educational, legal, political, economic, and religious systems as well as the media. Within educational systems, collaborators emphasized the need to depict women and girls in the curriculum

and educational materials as successful leaders, professionals, athletes, and other roles culturally defined as "masculine". They noted that the important contributions of women historically should be included in history books and classes. Also mentioned was the importance of teaching critical thinking rather than emphasizing rote memory in the educational process so that girls and boys can learn to think for themselves and interrogate the social messages they received regarding gender. From a legal perspective, group members highlighted the need to develop laws that promote equal opportunity for women and men and protect women from discrimination. The need for laws against wife abuse, sexual assault, and sexual harassment was also stressed. Politically, collaborators consistently recognized that increased representation of women in positions of influence in organizations, government, and in the educational and legal systems was essential in order to facilitate social change. Additionally, many groups saw the need for enlightened men who could serve as allies and advocates in the political system. Increased economic independence was seen as necessary to strengthen women's status in society. This would involve leveling the wage differences between men and women and developing programs in which women could receive small business loans and grants. Within the religious systems groups saw the necessity of continuing the campaign to give women access to full ordination and providing nuns with religious education at the same level as monks. The Thai groups emphasized supporting women like Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, who has chosen to subvert the male dominated institutions of Buddhism and ordain through alternative routes. In terms of the media, several groups suggested boycotting products being promoted through the use of advertisements that exploit or objectify women.

All of the participants agreed that more work was needed to further operationalize these ideas for social transformation. They also recognized that collective action was essential in addition to focusing on smaller, more achievable goals in order to increase the likelihood of success and to prevent burnout and discouragement. A large percentage of group members emphasized the need for a spiritual practice in conjunction with activism to help maintain perspective and to give a larger meaning and purpose to the joys and the suffering that are inevitable in social justice work.

Summary and Conclusions

The information generated by this project offers a glimpse into the lives of women of Southeast Asia, specifically Thailand, Cambodia, and the refugee women of Burma. The project has offered the women themselves an opportunity to report their own experiences of gender-based violence and their analysis of the structures and institutions that support violence against women. These preliminary efforts to articulate ideas for dismantling the structures of violence in their countries and replacing them with structures of peace and gender equity demonstrate that they are actively engaged in a movement involving strategizing and implementing social change on behalf of women. The feminist movements of Southeast Asia are well underway and demand respect and support for their efforts to solve their problems and transform their societies using models that fit their cultures and contexts.

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